

"The Off Season"

By KEVIN MANLEY
JRK Seed

All of us can remember a time, when the golf season was over, and we were off till spring. There was finally lots of time to spend with the family, kick back and read a book, time to travel, go ice fishing, time to pursue a hobby and the list goes on and on. Now most of us would agree the "off season" is no longer off. Trade Shows, educational seminars, goal planning, budgeting, human resource issues and the like devour our so called off season.

However, as most of us get older and wiser we realize that our career is a means for us to truly develop our hobbies and passions outside work. While all of us would agree our family comes first, there are certain activities that "complete us." I think the movie Jerry Maguire coined the famous words "you complete me," so this is the basis of that as it relates to our hobbies instead of our partners.

My younger days found me growing up in Northern California surrounded by grape vines and fruit trees. One day my dad brought home an article from the *San Francisco Chronicle* (late '60s) which spoke of a problem a prominent bay area golf course had with waterfowl eating its turf grass and leaving messy droppings for its golfers. The superintendent's solution to the problem was to employ a local falconer to pursue and chase



Larry

waterfowl from the golf course using the ancient art of falconry. While the superintendent found moderate success, I found a lifestyle that has survived for over 40 years! Besides golf courses, falconry has been employed at airports to rid large birds from the runways, specialty farms like fish farming and agricultural fields to discourage crop predation.

You see growing up in coastal California is a place that draws you out of the house and into the wilderness. My enjoyment for the outdoors and this art form called falconry brought me face to face with a lifestyle that continues to this day! Falconry is a hunting sport, a partnership between falconer and falcon to capture wild game, a predator-prey relationship that allows the falconer an intimate look into the daily life of our raptorial partners. My mom's attempts at sequestering me into a room with a piano instead of exploring the great outdoors left me frustrated and her exhausted. The good news, my little brother came along and he loved the piano and the world was back in balance! My mom had her piano player and I had my falcon. Thank God for little brothers!

The history of falconry goes back thousands of years to the people of China, India, Egypt and Persia and later the Roman Empire and then Europe. Those early hunters found greater success in using birds of prey to put meat on the table than arrows as the birds were hard to approach and all too soon out of range. Genghis Khan would travel in a pavilion mounted on the backs of four elephants to watch falconers chase cranes and other birds from the comforts of his royal couch. Marco Polo meeting the Grand Khan wrote about his adventures and brought his stories back to Europe. William Shakespeare writes of falconry throughout his plays and uses the terminology of falconry to describe many of his characters and their sometime romantic activities. In Act III, Scene iii of the play *As You Like It* Shakespeare writes "As the ox hath his bow, sir, the horse his curb, and the falcon her bells, so has man his desires". The Roman Emperor Fredrick II of Hohenstaufen built hunting castles throughout Italy and Sicily to house his falcons and falconers.

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Historically, it was said he lost a major battle because he was enjoying the pursuit of falconry and not his military duties. He did write one of the earliest treatises on falconry and it was highly regarded for his acute training techniques and his understanding of the biology and care of raptors. Royal families from the east would trade their falcons with the kings of the west and the sport became known as the 'Sport of Kings.'

Prior to the advent of gunpowder, falconry provided food for the table. After guns were developed hunters looked upon birds of prey as competition for the same game they now hunted. Once prized and held in high esteem early settlers shot them on migration by the thousands. Today all birds of prey are protected and their place in the environment is well understood. Rachel Carson, in her book *Silent Spring*, pushed open the door of understanding on how inter-connected the food chain is whether human or peregrine falcon and the effects of bio-accumulation as it related to DDT and the almost extinction of this truly unique species. Cornell University, the Peregrine Fund and numerous falconers embarked on a historical restoration effort to save it and restore the environment free of the pesticide that almost killed it. Today the peregrine nest throughout its historical range and we find it raising its families on skyscrapers, bridges, power plant emission towers and its traditional sites along the north shore of Lake Superior and the bluffs of the Mississippi.

Falconry is practiced today on all continents except Antarctica. Its followers are few but passionate about their life they share with one of nature's most highly evolved creatures. To illustrate this would involve a day in the field with Larry, my hybrid falcon. Larry (named by my sons) seemed an appropriate name since he was born in 1992 the same year that Larry Bird retired from the Boston Celtics. Larry is a hybrid falcon, a gyrfalcon crossed with a peregrine falcon. We hybridized the two to give us the cold hardy qualities of the arctic gyrfalcon and the highly desired flight qualities of one of the fastest birds in the world, the peregrine falcon. You see, hunting in the Upper Midwest in the winter requires a bird that truly enjoys hunting in subzero temperatures.

On a memorable outing we left our home for a short ride south of the Twin Cities to a small tributary of the



The hunting team

Vermillion River looking for wintering waterfowl. Having secured permission from the landowner in advance, we set about our search for greenheads. Oh, by the way I have my old English setter to complete our hunting team. In my wallet a falconer's license and a small game hunting license complete with duck and pheasant stamp. You see we have to follow hunting seasons just like gun hunters but slightly extended for falconry. As you might guess, the anticipation of flying your falcon at a seasoned mallard from the prairie pothole region of Canada is only matched by the tail wag-gin of an English setter hell-bent on doing her job. Prior visits to this location had yet to produce a flight on ducks. On this day the temperature was -5 degrees with a slight breeze and sunny clear skies. You see all this matters when flying a falcon at game. Along with watching the weather, Larry has been weighed on a gram scale to determine if he is at his hunting weight. The hunting weight is determined by conditioning and exercising your falcon to be physically fit like a wild falcon and yet hungry enough to capture wild game. And he has to be smart enough to understand the flight and escape strategies of the game in which we are to hunt including ducks, pheasants and Hungarian partridge. Understanding your falcon is one thing but understanding its prey and the interaction it has with your falcon makes hunting this way very challenging. Today proved to be different, a pair of mallards fed quietly on a small pool surrounded by willows, red twigged dogwoods, cattails and a sliver of ice. The flight begins by removing the leash and swivel which has

been tied to his block perch in which he travels in the truck. A small two stage transmitter is placed around his neck with a #14 rubber band in case the flight takes us far afield and he needs to be tracked. You probably know that birds of prey have incredible eyesight and they might see something miles away before you flush the intended quarry. The pigeons that were picking grit on the gravel road were intentionally bumped by me and the truck to the safety of a farmers silo so he didn't mistake them for the intended quarry when released. A short walk out into the corn stubble and the hood is removed from Larry's head and the flight is on! A quick look around and a bit of time for his eyes to adjust to the bright, frigid air and he is off. His wing beat is strong and deep as he climbs into the sky. His outrun takes him downwind about a quarter mile where he begins his ascent. Climbing into the sky he cuts a spiral path up and up and up. On this day he is over a thousand feet in the sky and becomes a speck as he moves closer to me and the ducks. From his lofty position he takes total control of the airspace...nothing moves. As he comes overhead Larry is now "waiting on" a falconry term describing the position of the falcon as he awaits the flush. At this moment, the thread that ties falcon, falconer and setter is ready for the flush. The old setter knows the game and waits my direction. As Larry comes slightly upwind of the ducks, I release my setter and she makes her way into the flush. Reluctantly, the pair of Mallards become airborne and fly their escape low over the stubble field...my attention turns skyward and my falcon begins his descent...a couple of quick wing beats to gain maximum speed and he now folds his wings tightly to his aerodynamic body. Gravity and evolution push him to speeds approaching two hundred miles per hour. For a brief second Larry and the hen come together and she falls into the stubble field...his outrun carries him into the drake as he tries to make his way back to the safety of the stream and they land together on the ice. The struggle is brief and Larry takes his prey to the safety of a nearby dogwood to feed and instinctively hide from other predators that may want his prey while he is on the ground. The hen only stunned by the blow makes her way back to the stream. The ride home is quiet, Larry's crop is stuffed with duck, and my old setter is happy and half asleep lying next to me. A perfect day in the field...I say a special prayer of thanks that we're all safe and the promise of another day in the "off season" can only come too soon!